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Moratorium

Wayne Karlin

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Mor*a*to*ri*um, n. 1. an authorization to delay payment due.

Deborah asked, "Everything all right?"

"Just the early morning broods."

She watched his hands as he soaped them. "I'm still scared of how you're taking it.

"How am I taking it?" He turned to her, holding his dripping hands up like a surgeon who'd just scrubbed.

"Too seriously. Like some momentous, ceremonial occasion. but it's just a party to most of the people. That's why I stopped going."

"I thought you stopped going because of me."

"That's what I mean."

They sat down on the bed, settling back against the pillows. She put her head on his chest.

"In our Operations tent," he said, "there was this gunny sergeant; he kept a framed photograph on his desk. Not the wife and kids, but this picture from the *New York Times*, a shot of one of the first marches. He'd circled one marcher's head with this grease pencil he used on the flight board, used to write in the names of the crews going on missions. Above the guy's head he wrote 'Traitor—to be killed.' The circle was real thick and dark and you could see he'd pressed down very hard with rage because of the smudge where the tip of the pencil had broken off."

"Nobody's going to draw a halo around your head," Deborah said.

He got off the bed and walked over to the closet. The night before he'd hung up his jungle shirt and some jeans and hooked the hanger over the door, ready as if he were going on an early morning flight, a mission. He'd pinned his wings to the shirt. The gunny, he remembered suddenly, was the kind of NCO who would write people up for chickenshit, stateside offenses like being out of uniform, as if he felt he had a mission to maintain standards, standards that didn't apply in the circumstances of the war. Brian put on his shirt, running the tip of his fingertips over the metal wings. A knock startled him. He waited until Deborah had pulled on a long shirt and then opened the door.

Barry was wearing a khaki shirt with his ribbons and Combat Infantry Badge on it. He grinned at Brian's shirt: their choice of clothing hadn't been planned.

"Green side out," he said. He touched Brian's shoulder. "How you feeling?"

"Traitor—to be killed," Brian said.
"Absolutely."

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They made a pit stop at the Maryland House. He and Barry had a smoke while they waited for Deborah and Barry's girl Phyllis to get out of the rest room. Barry pumped gas, the cigarette dangling from his mouth. A silver grey Plymouth pulled up next to them. In the passenger seat was a blond woman with a beehive hairdo. She glanced at Brian, then patted her hair, as if his gaze had made her conscious of it. The driver was wearing a khaki uniform, Army class A's, like Barry's, a colored rectangle of ribbons on his chest. The woman tilted the mirror again and a rhomboid of light projected over the face of the soldier inside. The face looked vaguely accusing and pissed off. He'd been holding a kind of tension, Brian realized, since yesterday, since he'd decided to go. Now something in the angle of light, in the blurred features of the face, allowed that tension to relax in a kind of internal collapse into the face of Jim Bernard.

Bernard was a boy who had died in Brian's place, flying gunner on a routine resupply mission to Hill 327 during what was to have been the last week of the war for both of them. The squadron was rotating to Okinawa to get new helicopters; it had lost five aircraft and the ships it had left were in bad shape after four solid months of operations along the DMZ. Three of the lost choppers had gone down to American artillery, flying into a barrage someone forgot to call off in time. Brian had been in the ship just behind; he'd seen one of the 155MM shells drift almost casually into the open hatch of one of the aircraft. Afterwards the squadron had been pulled back to Okinawa. He and Bernard were in the last increment to leave. On nearly the last day Brian had drawn flight duty, but Bernard had asked if he could take it instead. Brian couldn't even remember the reason for it, he didn't know Bernard that well, they weren't really friends, just military acquaintances. Maybe Bernard figured he'd be called the next day and wanted to get his last flight over, maybe he needed a mission for an air medal. At any rate, Brian had heard enough stories of people killed in the last days of their tours. Outside the war, you told stories like that to prevent them from happening to you. But in the war telling them was more like calling something to life. If Bernard wanted to take his place, that was fine with him. They'd gone to the operations sergeant, the one with the photograph on his desk, and they'd made the switch. That night the helicopter on which Brian would have been went on a standard resupply flight to a company of grunts. It was on approach when it came under fire and a single bullet hit the helicopter and penetrated it and Bernard's body, going through the gunner's seat where Brian would have been sitting, entering below the bottom edge of Bernard's flak jacket instead of

Brian's, travelling perpendicularly through Bernard's body instead of Brian's.

Now Brian stood in a gas station in Maryland watching the face of a soldier watching him from behind a windshield.

He wondered if the request to switch had been a last minute effort on Bernard's part to deal with some perceived internal weakness while he still had the chance. There were people who came to the war for that. Perhaps many people. It was rough on the Vietnamese. Brian remembered how scared Bernard had been. In the old aviator's canard, he wasn't afraid of flying, but only of coming down. The country itself filled Bernard with terror; it was so unlike the flat Kansas plains he came from. It pulsed with the overlush greens of an evil Oz. The fragmented mirrors of its paddies held images of broken helicopters in their depths. Its jagged, broody cordilleras and secretive triple-canopied jungle randomly and maliciously spurted fire upwards. The helicopters would only touch the land briefly to release men onto it, then touch briefly again soon after to pick up the bodies of the same men, smashed as if they'd been chewed by the country. What happened in the time between was unknown to the helicopter crews. One of the crew chiefs Bernard flew with was a friend of Brian's; he had confided his uneasiness about his gunner to Brian. Each time they landed, Bernard had been more afraid, his finger trembling on the trigger even in cold LZs, on some hair trigger inside himself that was wearing closer and closer to the sear. Brian understood; he was worn in the same places. On missions, the gunner was an impotent spectator, except when shooting his gun. Brian sat in the same seat; he knew the feeling of helplessness. His helicopter had flown cover on one insert when Bernard's helicopter had let off a squad of grunts and the crews had watched in horror, not frozen, but hovering, darting, hosing the treeline with fire, but all of it useless as the grunts ran in fire team rushes towards that treeline, falling, one fire team after another cut down and not one hesitating, just working, moving professionally towards the trees that were killing them; one man after another zigging and zagging and falling as if it were some well thought out, tactically planned process they were all following to get killed quickly. Then on Bernard's next flight, his helicopter developed a hydraulic leak and had to autorotate down to a hard landing in a paddy, the ship spinning, the land sucking him down to itself as if he were water rushing helplessly down a drain. A clearly pregnant woman squatted among the rice shoots, watching the helicopter come into her life. She'd frozen, war wise, knowing that the helicopters shot anyone who ran, not knowing that Bernard was in this one. That night he'd joked about getting two gooks with one round. The phase became a standard with the air crews, a measure of shooting proficiency. A joke.

The face behind the windshield mouthed silently at Brian. He saw the woman put a hand on the soldier's shoulder, as if restraining him.

The memories were coming faster, some pressed spring he'd lived with so long its tight compression had become normal, suddenly released in his mind. He remembered how he'd flown back to Travis Air Force Base in San Francisco on the same C-130 with about twenty other men from his squadron whose tours had finished while they were on Okinawa. It was the nearest thing the war had to the traditional coming back as a unit: the random mathematics of their time in-country giving them an accidental parade, even if it only consisted of being herded up the ramp of the cargo plane together. For the first time they wore the class A khaki uniforms they hadn't seen for a year, whitened crease lines on them where the cloth had been folded into their stored sea bags, new ribbons and silver combat aircrew wings bright on their chests. Perhaps noticing the wings, some of the Air Force crew brought them coffee; they had wings too; they were all birdmen, brothers of the air. How was it, the airmen had asked, and the marines told sea stories, air stories, shot down stories, shoot up the village stories, toss the prisoner stories. Now the stories were not warnings but rather rituals of complicity; the marines laughingly comparing the callouses they'd built around their hearts as though they were comparing wounds or campaign ribbons. Brian told how Bernard had gotten two gooks with one round. But the airmen didn't laugh. They didn't get the joke. They looked at the marines, at the wings on their chests, strangely. Then the marines had fallen silent too. They blinked as if awakening from a dream in which the laws and customs of the world had been suspended. Brian could feel a silence folding around them and he knew that they, he, wouldn't talk about the war anymore, or if they did, they'd try to fit it into more expected references. That nobody would get the joke.

"What are you men doing?"

The soldier had gotten out of the Plymouth. Brian, focusing back, realized that he hadn't even noticed the process; it played in his mind now like a memory behind the memories of that flight home and Bernard: the car door opening, the frowning face, the woman tugging the soldier's arm, trying to pull him back. There were silver first lieutenant's bars on the man's collar. Brian's eyes went automatically to the ribbons. The yellow and red Vietnam service ribbon was there, but there was no CIB, no wings, no purple heart, only the been-there ribbons.

"I said what are you men doing?" the lieutenant frowned at Brian.

"You men?" Barry said, squinting at him.

The lieutenant's face was red. "Led me see your IDs."

Barry laughed. "Look. LT, we're not in the service anymore."

"Then you have no right to be wearing those uniforms. There's a law against impersonating a soldier." He glared at them. "I know where you're going. You're both disgraces. I want your names—both of you."

Brian looked, startled, at the lieutenant, then began laughing. "You want to write me up," he said in wonder. The lieutenant stared at him, still frowning. "You want to write me up now." He laughed more.

"Hey, lieutenant, where the fuck were you?" He felt the laughter brittle in his mouth and throat, a thin breaking crust over an anger that came as much from the automatic cringe of military fear he'd felt, still felt, at the sight of the silver bars, as it was at the lieutenant's words and arrogance.

"Why don't you just di di the fuck out of here," he said. "You understand that term, lieutenant? Or you just impersonating a dickhead?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Phyllis and Deborah coming back from the ladies room. Barry turned his back on the lieutenant. He pulled the pump nozzle out of the tank and screwed on the gas cap. His face was tight. He arced the gas nozzle close to the lieutenant's face. Some gas dribbled back from the end and the lieutenant stepped back slightly. Barry nodded at Brian and poked the nozzle forward a little. He poked the nozzle closer and the lieutenant backed up. Gas fell on his spit shine. Barry held the cigarette in his other hand, between thumb and forefinger. He flicked it. "Ever see a gook flambé, LT, a crispy critter? Ever write one up? No? Where were you when that was going down? Like the man asked—where the fuck were you? Some office? Pointing a pointer at some map overlay, some grid I was on? Want a cigarette? Want a light? No? Then like my friend here said, you better di di. Don't let your alligator mouth overload your lizard ass and all that other kind of Vietnam talk."

The lieutenant tried a hard OCS stare at him. "You men will hear about this, I promise you. I have your license number."

The woman in the Plymouth stuck her head out the window. "Leave them alone, Martin. We're late."

"You're late, Martin," Barry said. "So move on, lieutenant pogue. You got my number—give me a call sometime."

The lieutenant left. Brian saw that Phyllis and Deborah were staring at him and Barry as if they'd never seen them before.

* * *

At some distance the march trembled between the buildings and Brian felt an answering shudder in his chest. He couldn't see either end of the column. On the car radio they'd heard there were half a million people in the streets of Washington. The announcer had commented that this was the equivalent of the number of troops still in Vietnam. Similar numbers were reported from New York, San Francisco, Chicago.

He tried to hang onto a feeling of purposefulness in being part of the movement of so many people. But instead he felt himself settling into the dullness he always assumed when marching in a column, an interior blankness that he moved in until he got where he was going. The people around him were linking arms, smiling at each other, chanting for peace now. He lip-synched the words, feeling self-conscious. Deborah had been pushed a little ways from him and a woman hooked her arm with

his and grinned at him. Her other arm was linked with a priest's. He smiled at Brian too. He saw the priest's gaze brush the wings on his chest, the man catching his eye, nodding in approval. He brought his hand up, covered the insignia. He had the wings, he needed the halo. I'm out of uniform, priest. Write me up. The chanting grew louder. Phyllis, Barry's arm draped over her shoulder, looked over he shoulder at Brian; she was smiling also. I can't hear you, she mouthed. All of a sudden he was back in boot camp. Get back and do it again. Get it right this time. I can't hear you. All the people around him were chanting and grinning about the event that had been his life as if they knew something about it, moving their signs and banners up and down in a cadence. They didn't know but they'd been told. "I can't hear you!" he yelled. He thought how they would look without the noise coming from their mouths, the way he would turn down the sound on the television and watch the grotesque pantomimes of the news announcers, their inane smiles encompassing images of corpses and shooting men and burning hootches. When he'd first gotten back, before meeting Deborah, he'd rented a small room and spent hours watching TV, as if he could plug himself back into the country, get back on some wavelength he was missing. On the screen, little grey figures ran across paddies, fell, rose; he was one of them, escaped right out of the box, loose in the streets. Out of uniform. Impersonating a human being. "PEACE NOW!" he yelled and laughed. The woman and the priest laughed too, but he laughed louder, until they looked at him uneasily. He could get the two of them with one round. They were all bunched up with someplace to go. He couldn't see Deborah. Suddenly a truck pulled in front of him, from a side street, breaking into the crowd. It was draped with VC and North Vietnamese flags and there was a rock band on its bed, playing very hard, the marching band for this parade. The music jerked the crowd. Brian could see one of the player's faces very clearly. It was pale and pimpled and the boy's eyes were blank as if all his emotions had been poured into the blurred motion of his fingers on the guitar strings. The boy had made a VC flag into a vest. He was bare-chested under it, his upper body white and skinny. Brian stared at the boy's face. He wanted to break it with his fist, knead expressions into it, knead its features, give it to Jim Bernard. But the face stayed blank. His feelings didn't particularly move it.

"Hey, man," he yelled at the boy. "Hey, you're out of uniform." The boy cupped one hand behind his ear and smiled at Brian helplessly. He didn't get the joke.

Brian looked away from the boy, searching for Deborah; she was pushed a little farther forward. He spotted Barry and Phyllis, near her. They were looking up at the spectators in the windows of apartments and government office buildings, searching for any people cheering them from behind the walls of respectability and legitimacy. Some of the windows had jungly green plants behind them, screening another world

that hid behind the facade of the building. Faces peered at him in silent disapproval. They had his number. The lieutenant's face mouthed angrily at him from behind the glass. It blurred and disappeared. Move on, lieutenant pogue.

He'd stopped to look up at the window, letting the crowd break around him. When he looked back down, he couldn't see Deborah anywhere. He felt a pushing sense of panic. He began shoving through the marchers. The crowd trapped him, it was a pressure at his temples. He pushed through, feeling bodies like vines and roots, holding his passage for an instant then giving and slipping past him. He grasped with his hands in a swimming motion, taking people by the shoulders and parting them out of his way. They glared at him, but said nothing until he was past; then they'd start chanting again as if he'd never touched them. He saw Deborah, talking to the priest and made a final thrust and broke through, reaching out blindly, connecting with the priest's arm. All those personnel wishing halos will assemble to the right and rear of the duty priest. He gripped the priest's arm. *Semper fi*, sky pilot, you got yours, how'm I doing? The priest was staring at him. Brian released his arm.

You're late, sky pilot. Move on. Don't let your alligator intentions overload your lizard dimensions.

They were moving through a gap in a row of parked school buses and into the Mall area now. As the column broke and spread into the clearing, he could see for the first time the vastness of the crowd, gathered because of an event in his life. It filled the center of the city, the white tower of the monument rising from its center. Half a million people, Deborah said into his ear, half a million was his number and suddenly he could see the concept of it, unabstract, solidly filling space. He could see with his eyes what half a million was. He felt utterly outside them, on the other side of a hard, transparent screen. The half million were laughing and dancing and he tried to think about Jim Bernard who'd died in his place and the woman and the future Bernard had killed from his place and in his name and in their name, these people around him who wouldn't look at him now and he looked at them and he could see how they would be dead, all dead and lying on the grass, silent and spilling into the earth. I can't hear you, he thought. He sat down where he was. He was waiting for something inside himself and when it finally came and he began crying it came in waves so hard he felt they had to move out of him, ripple through the hugeness of the crowd. But when he looked up he only saw a woman staring at him as if surprised at what he was doing. He couldn't stop it. There was no release in it. Deborah put a hand on his shoulder. He bowed his head back down, pressing his face against the cloth of his shirt and the noise faded again. It was as if he were alone in the cradle of his arms.